

**Etheridge Knight. 1931 – 1991**

1

Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my father, mother, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

I have at one time or another been in love with my mother, 1 grandmother, 2 sisters, 2 aunts (1 went to the asylum), and 5 cousins. I am now in love with a 7-yr-old niece (she sends me letters in large block print, and her picture is the only one that smiles at me).

I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews, and 1 uncle. The uncle disappeared when he was 15, just took off and caught a freight (they say). He's discussed each year when the family has a reunion, he causes uneasiness in the clan, he is an empty space. My father's mother, who is 93 and who keeps the Family Bible with everybody's birth dates (and death dates) in it, always mentions him. There is no place in her Bible for "whereabouts unknown."

2

Each fall the graves of my grandfathers call me, the brown hills and red gullies of mississippi send out their electric messages, galvanizing my genes. Last yr/like a salmon quitting the cold ocean-leaping and bucking up his birth stream/I hitchhiked my way from LA with 16 caps in my pocket and a monkey on my back. And I almost kicked it with the kinfolks. I walked barefooted in my grandmother's backyard/I smelled the old land and the woods/I sipped cornwhiskey from fruit jars with the men/ I flirted with the women/I had a ball till the caps ran out and my habit came down. That night I looked at my grandmother and split/my guts were screaming for junk/but I was almost contented/I had almost caught up with me.  
(The next day in Memphis I cracked a croaker's crib for a fix.)

This yr there is a gray stone wall damming my stream, and when the falling leaves stir my genes, I pace my cell or flop on my bunk and stare at 47 black faces across the space. I am all of them, they are all of me, I am me, they are thee, and I have no children to float in the space between.

**The Prison Cell – Mahmoud Darwish. 1941-2008**

It is possible...

It is possible at least sometimes...

It is possible especially now

To ride a horse

Inside a prison cell

And run away...

It is possible for prison walls

To disappear,

For the cell to become a distant land

Without frontiers:

What did you do with the walls?

I gave them back to the rocks.

And what did you do with the ceiling?

I turned it into a saddle.

And your chain?

I turned it into a pencil.

The prison guard got angry.

He put an end to my dialogue.

He said he didn't care for poetry,

And bolted the door of my cell.

He came back to see me

In the morning,

He shouted at me:

Where did all this water come from?

I brought it from the Nile.

And the trees?

From the orchards of Damascus.

And the music?

From my heartbeat.

The prison guard got mad;

He put an end to my dialogue.

He said he didn't like my poetry,

And bolted the door of my cell.

But he returned in the evening:

Where did this moon come from?

From the nights of Baghdad.

And the wine?

From the vineyards of Algiers.

And this freedom?

From the chain you tied me with last night.

The prison guard grew so sad...

He begged me to give him back

His freedom.

**Here We Will Stay** – Tawfiq Zayyad. 1929-1994. Written in solitary.

Here We Will Stay  
In Lidda, in Ramla, in the Galilee,  
we shall remain  
like a wall upon your chest,  
and in your throat  
like a shard of glass,  
a cactus thron,  
and in your eyes  
a sandstorm.  
We shall remain  
a wall upon your chest,  
clean dishes in your restaurants,  
serve drinks in your bars,  
sweep the floors of your kitchens  
to snatch a bite for our children  
from your blue fangs.  
Here we shall stay,  
sing our songs,  
take to the angry streets,  
fill prisons with dignity.  
In Lidda, in Ramla, in the galilee,  
we shall remain,  
guard the shade of the fig  
and olive trees,  
ferment rebellion in our children  
as yeast in the dough.

**Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying** – Noor Hindi

Colonizers write about flowers.  
I tell you about children throwing rocks at Israeli tanks  
seconds before becoming daisies.  
I want to be like those poets who care about the moon.  
Palestinians don't see the moon from jail cells and prisons.  
It's so beautiful, the moon.  
They're so beautiful, the flowers.  
I pick flowers for my dead father when I'm sad.  
He watches Al Jazeera all day.  
I wish Jessica would stop texting me Happy Ramadan.  
I know I'm American because when I walk into a room something dies.  
Metaphors about death are for poets who think ghosts care about sound.  
When I die, I promise to haunt you forever.  
One day, I'll write about the flowers like we own them.

### **Bobby Sands – ‘WEEPING WINDS’**

Oh! Cold March winds your cruel laments  
Are hard on prisoners' hearts,  
For you bring my mother's pleading cries  
From whom I have to part.  
I hear her weeping lonely sobs  
Her sorrows sweep me by,  
And in the dark of prison cell  
A tear has warmed my eye.

Oh! Whistling winds why do you weep  
When roaming free you are,  
Oh! Is it that your poor heart's broke  
And scattered off afar?  
Or is it that you bear the cries  
Of people born unfree,  
Who like your way have no control  
Or sovereign destiny?

Oh! Lonely winds that walk the night  
To haunt the sinner's soul  
Pray pity me a wretched lad  
Who never will grow old.  
Pray pity those who lie in pain  
The bondsman and the slave,  
And whisper sweet the breath of God  
Upon my humble grave.

Oh! Cold March winds that pierce the dark  
You cry in aged tones  
For souls of folk you've brought to God  
But still you bear the moans.  
Oh! Weeping wind this lonely night  
My mother's heart is sore,  
Oh! Lord of all breathe freedom's breath  
That she may weep no more.

### **PRISON LIFE – anonymous. *Poetry of Women Prisoners* (ed. Sue Stauffacher)**

It's waiting on letters  
When you're doing time.  
And your family won't write,  
or send you a dime.  
It's waiting on visits  
that never take place,  
from friends or loved ones,  
who forgot your face  
It's hearing them lie  
And saying that we're trying,  
making you promises  
but you know they are lying  
It's making plans with someone  
Who you thought you knew,  
but their plans suddenly change,  
and it didn't include you  
It's hearing them say how much they care,  
but in your time of need  
they are never there.  
It's hearing them promise  
and it goes straight to your head,  
But when push comes to shove,  
They leave you for dead.  
It's feelings and Love  
Honor and Pride.  
Pain and Emotions and hurting inside  
It's expressing yourself to your loved ones,  
and friends,  
But they can't feel your pain because you're in the pen  
It's calling and hearing  
“ ‘A’ Block's on the phone.”  
But you maintain  
Because life goes on  
It's really messed up when you're doing time  
But that's “Prison Life.”  
Out of sight, out of mind.

a small selection of poems by prisoners and against prisons for soup ink.

monday 20<sup>th</sup> june 2024

**there are no separate worlds.**

*“Across borders, languages, contexts, and identities, both catastrophes and victories of spirit and defiance reverberate around the globe.*

*One environment is not untouched by another. The personal is not separate from the political.*

*The positive project is not separate from that of destruction. Prison is not separate from the “free world.”*

*Means are not separate from ends.*

*Bridging these divides is a shared curiosity and commitment; bridging these divides is solidarity. This is not to flatten or oversimplify diversity and differences in circumstance, intensity, and consequence. Rather, that these different pieces are held together like organs of the body held by connective tissue.*

*So we consider: how do we strengthen this connective tissue? How do we remain strong, yet supple and flexible? Bridges, connection, must also be built through time, especially in a world that moves too fast, from one crisis to the next.*

*June 11th aspires to be one of these bridges: to build solidarity across borders, between movements, and among generations. Remembering and supporting long-term prisoners, as well as carrying on shared struggles, are two ways to strengthen this connective tissue. A stronger connective tissue will, in turn, bolster us against further repression”*

– June 11 Call 2024

**Prison is – Marius Mason, 2014**

Hushed and heavy

Like water near the Ocean’s floor,

Then loud and bitter,

Like fractious storms lashing the sky

Everything cement and nerves

And too many years gone by...

The heart requires a place to rest

From all its maddened wanderings

The raft of the Medusa tossed

And trembling in the sea.

Or just this table here

And you across from me,

A sunlit sail

And I this aching castaway.

I cannot touch you—it is not allowed.

Our eyes hold

Hanging onto words

Until a hand falls upon the back

The narrow hall, the clanking keys

The door, the cell

And under.